

On Being a Professional

**Extension personnel must learn to evaluate
knowledge and cooperative activity in a broader
context than immediate application to the technical job**

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AS IS TRUE with most other occupational groups, Cooperative Extension workers strive for professional status. Ever since the advent of the Service, one criterion of professionalism has been held up for emulation: a long period of specialized training. The meaning of "long" gets longer each decade of Extension's operation.

Whatever thought I had given to the nature of Extension professionalism until recently had crystallized into the simple thesis that a professional attitude is one of six career developmental tasks facing each Extension worker. The thought was that if the Extension worker has a professional attitude he not only thinks of what he gains from being classed as a professional but of what he contributes to professional standing for the Cooperative Extension Service. To be truly professional, I had decided, an Extension person must take an experimental attitude toward his work. He must develop insatiable curiosity as to what works and why. He must search continually for the better way, see Extension work as problem solving—requiring four "i's": integrity, intelligence, ingenuity, and initiative. He will seek more training for the personal satisfaction of acquiring knowledge and for the privilege of associating with the great ideas and people of the world—and not solely for the extrinsic values of promotion, salary increase, and the like.¹

PROFESSIONALISM AS A GROOVE

Reading Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* gave me a

¹ Mary L. Collings, *Career Development Tasks*, ER&T-91 (5-59) (Washington: Federal Extension Service, 1959).

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deeper insight into the nature of professionalism. Whitehead equates professionalism with specialization in these terms:

Effective knowledge is professionalized knowledge, supported by a restricted acquaintance with useful subjects subservient to it. . . . This situation has its dangers. It produces minds in a groove. Each professional makes progress, but it is progress in its own groove. . . .

The dangers arising from this aspect of professionalism are great, particularly in our democratic societies. The directive force of reason is weakened. The leading intellects lack balance. They see this set of circumstances, or that set; but not both sets together. . . . In short, the specialized functions of the community are performed better and more progressively, but the generalized direction lacks vision. . . .²

General Education

To provide for this balance, the lack of which Whitehead deplores, most of our colleges have required, for degree purposes at the undergraduate level, some courses defined as general education. In justification, a Harvard committee stated that:

Education is broadly divided into general education and special education. . . . The term general education is somewhat vague and colorless; it does not mean some airy education in knowledge in general (if there be such knowledge), nor does it mean education for all in the sense of universal education. It is used to indicate that part of a student's whole education which looks first of all to his life as a responsible human being and citizen; while the term, special education, indicates that part which looks to the student's competence in some occupation. These two sides of life are not entirely separable, and it would be false to imagine education for the one as quite distinct from education for the other. . . . Clearly, general education has somewhat the meaning of liberal education. . . .³

As undergraduates, the vast majority of Extension employees have been the recipients of a general education background, particularly in their first two years of college. But once entered into a career, they proceed to narrow their educational pursuits drastically. Even with freedom of choice, individuals are apt to limit themselves to educational experiences which have direct application to job skills. What happens then to the individual's continuing quest "to govern his own life" and "to share in the responsibility for the management of the community," cited by the Harvard committee report as the purpose of general or liberal education? Soon the fruits of general education tend to wither on the vine.

² Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1926), pp. 279-80.

³ Harvard University, *General Education in a Free Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), pp. 51-53.

When the term community is interpreted as meaning the community of workers in an Extension staff organization, the danger of over-professionalism is brought home to us. We begin to see in a new light those, who through long periods of service in Extension work with increasing specialization of staff functions, have lost any common basis of thought and philosophy with other Extension staff members. We note as a more serious consequence perhaps that the highly specialized individuals in the Service have become effective each in his field but have lost, as Whitehead would say, some of "the balanced development—the wisdom, of the educated man."⁴

In some states with large staffs the subgroups in our Extension profession have proliferated to the extent that we can almost be said to have a profession of county agents, a profession of home economics agents, a profession of specialists (or even of agronomists, animal husbandrymen, and so on). Each subgroup has gone its own way to develop a specialized concept of professional competence. In light of Whitehead's warning, we may wonder if this specialization is not a danger, first, to balanced development of each individual staff person's potential and, second, to staff coordination and common purpose. Recent criticisms from most unlikely sources point to other dangers.

Specialization

The argument for specialized function and the specialized knowledge which it encourages has grown out of modern scientific explorations. Rapid technological developments in recent years are a fact of life well known to every Extension worker. Greater specialization has been thought to be the inevitable cost of an expansion of knowledge. Lindeman, who has been cited as the source of "much of the best thought in adult education" (himself an exponent of liberal education), voiced the opinion that specialization was the price to be enacted for the discovery of new facts. He states that:

The evils of specialism have been duly noted by college presidents, publicists, and philosophers—noticed, verbally proscribed, and then left to multiply. Here stands a real dilemma: the division of knowledge goes speedily on with infinity as its goal whereas man's comprehending capacity is distinctly limited. Moreover, knowledge can be expanded only by the method of specialism: when one science becomes too complex for complete comprehension by a single mind, its problems must be subdivided, delimited; succeeding scientists concentrate upon a fraction of the total subject matter and attain success by means of his very con-

⁴ Whitehead, *op. cit.*

centration upon particularized objects and processes. Generalization may set new problems but specialism alone discovers new facts.⁵

This rationale is the basis of design for the usual graduate study program in American colleges today. Until recently there has been no criticism of it as the only feasible pattern for advanced exploration of an area of knowledge. A few cynics perhaps ridiculed the Ph.D. degree as the badge of those "who knew more and more about less and less." But now from a businessman comes a counter argument. Weiss cites the need for men of perspective, vision, and creative ability. He says:

What this country needs most of all today is creative thinking. And the way not to be creative is to be a specialist, and nothing more. It is only the generalist—the man who can relate one specialty to another—who can stop running long enough to find out if he is going in the right direction.

Now this paradox digs deep down into our roots—for the whole American educational system today is aimed at turning out specialists, and not generalists. These students are the ones, it must be admitted, who get the best jobs first; in terms of immediate employment opportunities, it is the technically trained graduate who is offered the plum.

But as he begins to move up the escalator of corporate and business life, unless he is adaptable, unless he is flexible, unless he has a broad grasp of affairs, he becomes less and less useful to the company.⁶

Balanced Development

Weiss cites examples to show that some of the greatest scientific discoveries were made by persons not specialized in the given professional field. He points out that neither anesthesia, asepsis, nor X-ray, so necessary for modern surgery, were discovered by surgeons. Immunization, penicillin, and tranquilizers were all happy accidents of research done in other fields. He cites Benjamin Franklin, "more universal than Newton or Voltaire," as an "all-around repository of knowledge and ability." He concludes:

I am not suggesting that most men can hope to reach even a fraction of the capacities of such geniuses. But it is not the *extent* of their talents I am pointing to—it is the *direction*. These men knew that we cannot isolate parts of ourselves from other parts. They knew, too, that if we show particular skill in one area, it is likely that we have it—at least potentially—in another area.⁷

⁵ Edward C. Lindeman, *The Meaning of Adult Education* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1961), pp. 75-84.

⁶ Edward H. Weiss, "The Pursuit of Creativity: the Paradox of Business," *Printer's Ink*, CCLXXXIII (April 9, 1963), 49.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately we have no measure of the creative ability of Extension workers to use as a basis for testing its relationship to a narrow or broad educational experience. But we can conclude that there are values to be had in the kind of education that is directed toward showing the relationships of one body of knowledge to other broad areas. We can no longer rely on a choice between technical proficiency and a good general education background. We are now realizing that the Extension worker needs both. Our educational route must be along the three main roads identified by Whitehead:

There are . . . three main roads along which we can proceed with good hope of advancing towards the best balance of intellect and character: these are the way of literary culture, the way of scientific culture, the way of technical culture. No one of these methods can be exclusively followed without grave loss of intellectual activity and of character. But a mere mechanical mixture of the three curricula will produce bad results in the shape of scraps of information never interconnected or utilized.

. . . The problem of education is to retain the dominant emphasis, whether literary, scientific, or technical and without loss of coordination to infuse into each way of education something of the other two. . . . I am only asserting the principles that training should be broader than the ultimate specializations and that the resulting power of adaptation to varying demands is advantageous to the workers, to the employers, and to the nation.⁸

That formal education is so often narrow is due, no doubt, in part, to the fragmentation of knowledge into numerous courses with prerequisites at each turn. It is also due to the average student's short-sightedness, throughout his formal educational experiences, in seeing the values of a better balance between the technical and the literary and scientific. If the Extension worker wishes to grow in balanced development, rather than to take a maximum of the applied courses, he needs to give thought to wider choices, throughout academic study, from basic physical and social sciences and the humanities. Technology which changes so rapidly will have to be learned and relearned by constant application throughout professional life. In-service training can best serve to shore-up technical competence.

LIFE-LONG LEARNING

Balanced development does not stop with undergraduate or even graduate education. For all Extension workers, two informal edu-

⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *The Aims of Education* (New York: The New American Library, 1949), pp. 62-63.

cational influences are imperative. These are (1) a continuous program of self-directed study throughout the career—study designed to broaden interests and fill in gaps—and (2) intelligent interaction (coordinating activities) with staff members from all divisions of the university. The purpose of these interactions (coordinating activities) would be to see one's own technical field through its physical, economic, sociological, psychological, aesthetic, and philosophic aspects. At these levels of concern, various technical subject-matter problems converge as several staff specialists, together with social scientists, help draw on common behavioral science findings.

Though Lindeman saw professionals "committed to specialization" he thought that "we secure the highest services of experts when they learn to integrate their functions with respect to specific problems." He explained that professional integration was not a "verbal exercise" but a "method by which active differences interpenetrate."

To take Whitehead's "three roads to balanced development" and achieve Lindeman's "interpenetration" will necessitate some changes in Extension thinking. Extension personnel must learn not to evaluate all knowledge and all cooperative activity from the standpoint of their immediate application to the technical job. They must see reflective thinking and study as a legitimate and equally important part of the daytime schedule. No longer can the agent or specialist afford to devote the whole waking day to such activity as travel, teaching, planning, demonstrating, expediting, and arranging. It must become as respectable to be studying and planning the application of behavioral science theories as it is to plan the application of physical science findings.

RESPONSIBILITY

After the basic scientific and technical education have been acquired, a great deal of the cost of keeping current is borne by the agency through its specialists' system and collaboration with research personnel. A great deal of the continuing literary and cultural education can be acquired through multiple-choice, low-cost evening classes, discussion groups, and self-directed reading. Graduate degree programs are more expensive.

In some states, traveling the three roads by means of graduate study is solely the responsibility of the individual, done voluntarily on his own time and at his own expense. For Extension workers in those states, anything other than technical training is apt to be "nice-to-know" if one can get to it, but definitely a luxury. In other states, effort toward greater competence along all three lines is partially

⁹ Lindeman, *op. cit.*

financed at agency expense. Some academic education as well as in-service training is provided on a rotation basis.

For the sake of those already employed without the basic literary and cultural education, it would be desirable if all states would provide for shared costs (assumed by personnel and agency). Coupled with this should be stricter employment standards. The willingness to share in the cost of balanced development separates the men from the boys in terms of their professional standards. Not essential in Extension's first 50 years, strong graduate preparation is increasingly important today.

SUMMARY

Professional standards are changing. Extension personnel cannot afford a one-road education. The Extension worker is promised by those steeped in the liberal tradition that following the literary and cultural roads, the technician in him will be "softened by humanizing influences." He will become more objective, more capable of self-criticism, more universal in his motives and sympathies, less provincial, and more a "spectator of all time and of all existence."

Whitehead's three roads call for the abandonment of a concept of education in college as a terminal experience and as largely technical preparation. Balanced development would set the Extension professional on a course of continuous unfolding and restructuring of himself as a person and increasing interpenetration (of thoughts, plans, competencies, and so on) with his co-workers. While the goal can never be adequately attained, the fullest pursuit of it depends on whether the Extension person sees his role as that of an educator or a technician.

IT MAY have been true once upon a time, but it simply is not true today, that we can make our way through life subsisting on what we stored in our minds during our school days. We have to add new facts and to rethink old thoughts.

—from *The Royal Bank of Canada Monthly Letter*, XLIV
(October, 1963).

THE man who is satisfied that there is nothing more for him to learn, and that he can dispense with any and every aid to success, is headed for trouble. The only way to continue to grow is to continue to learn.

—from B. C. FORBES as quoted in *Forbes*, XCII
(August 15, 1963), 50.